

Message Text

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INFO AMEMBASSY VIENTIANE

USMISSION GENEVA

AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI

AMCONSUL UDORN

C O N F I D E N T I A L BANGKOK 13740

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: SREF, LA, TH

SUBJ: MEO REFUGEES

REF: A. STATE 158901

B. BANGKOK 13412

SUMMARY: UNDER SECRETARY FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS PHAEN WANNAMETHI TOLD US JULY 9 THAT THE RTG PREFERS THAT US ASSISTANCE FOR MEO RESETTLEMENT BE CHANNLED THROUGH THE ICRC OR POSSIBLY THROUGH UNHCR. FOREIGN MINISTER CHATCHAI CHUNHAWAN WILL EXPLORE THIS POSSIBILITY AND DISCUSS OTHER REFUGEE PROBLEMS WITH THE ICRC DURING HIS UPCOMING VISIT TO GENEVA. WE SUGGESTED HE ALSO CALL ON UNHCR IN GENEVA, AND THE JULY 11 BANGKOK PRESS REPORTS THAT HE WILL DO SO. THE RTG CONTINUES TO HOPE THE MEO WILL EVENTUALLY RETURN TO LAOS. PHAEN SAID TENTATIVE AGREEMENT HAS BEEN REACHED BETWEEN THE RTG AND LAO GOVERNMENT (PGNU) THAT THE MEO CAN RETURN WITHOUT REPRISALS. PHAEN SAID ANY RESETTLEMENT BY MEO IN THAILAND WOULD BE TEMPORARY UNTIL CONDITIONS PERMIT THEM TO RETURN. PHAEN SAID ALSO THAT THE RTG HAS ASKED THE UNCHR
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FOR HELP IN HANDLING OTHER INDOCHINA REFUGEES IN THAILAND Q #

THE RTLCAKCOIZL#THAT ALL VIETNAMESE REFUGEES AND THE POLITICALLY SENSITIVE MILITARY AND CIVILIAN GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS FROM CAMBODIA AND LAOS MUST LEAVE THAILAND NOW. THE RTG, HOWEVER, WILL ATTEMPT TO RESETTLE TEMPORARILY THE REMAINING CAMBODIANS AND LAO PENDING THE TIME THEY CAN RETURN HOME.
END SUMMARY.

1. ON JULY 9 WE DISCUSSED THE MEO REFUGEE PROBLEM WITH MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS UNDER SECRETARY PHAEN WANNAMETHI AND SOUTH-EAST DIVISION CHIEF THEP TEWAKUN, WHO HANDLES REFUGEE MATTERS FOR THE MINISTRY. PHAEN AND THEP SAID RTG POLICY WITH REGARD TO THE MEO REFUGEES IN THAILAND WAS TO ENCOURAGE THEM BY EVERY MEANS AVAILABLE TO RETURN TO LAOS. THE RTG AND PGNU HAVE DISCUSSED THIS, AND TENTATIVE AGREEMENT HAS BEEN REACHED THAT MEO TRIBESMEN WHO ARE WILLING TO RETURN WILL NOT BE SUBJECT TO REPRISALS. THE RTG BELIEVES THAT WITHOUT MEO LEADER VANG PAO AND KNOWING THAT THEY WILL NOT BE ABLE TO GO TO THE UNITED STATES, MOST OF THE MEO WILL EVETUALLY AGREE TO RETURN TO LAOS. THE PGNU MAY ALSO SEND AN EMISSARY, PERHAPS TOUBY LYFOUNG, TO ASSURE THE MEO THEY WILL BE IN NO DANGER IF THEY RETURN. IN THE MEANTIME, THE RTG IS NOT MAKING LIFE TOO COMFORTABLE FOR THE MEO. THOSE IN NAN PROVINCE ARE BEING FORCED TO SELL THEIR POSSESSIONS TO BUY FOOD AND ARE NOT ALLOWED TO START GROWING CROPS.

2. AT SAME POINT THE RTG PLANS TO MOVE TO ONE SITE ALL THE MEO WHO DO NOT WISH TO RETURN AT THIS TIME. THE THAIS HAVE NOT YET DECIDED WHEN THE NEXT MOVE WILL TAKE PLACE. THE SITE HAS NOT BEEN DETERMINED, ALTHOUGH MAE JARIM SUB-DISTRICT OF NAN PROVINCE IS ONE POSSIBILITY. THEP SAID THESE MEO WILL NOT BE PERMANENTLY RESETTLED, HOWEVER, AND WILL ONLY BE ALLOWED TO REMAIN TEMPORARILY UNTIL THEY CAN RETURN TO LAOS. THEP NOTED IT WAS DIFFICULT TO PREDICT HOW LONG THEY COULD REMAIN, BUT MENTIONED THAT THREE MONTHS TO A YEAR OR SO MIGHT BE POSSIBLE. IF THERE WERE A FEW HUNDRED MEO WHO WERE UNWILLING TO RETURN AFTER THAT TIME, THEY COULD PROBABLY SETTLE PERMANENTLY IN THAILAND.

3. PHAEN THEN POINTED TO THE POLITICAL PROBLEM WITH THE LAOTIAN GOVERNMENT WHICH WOULD BE CREATED BY HAVING THE MEO IN THAILAND. TO LESSEN SUSPICION THAT THE RTG AND U.S. WERE
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PLOTTING TO USE THE MEO AGAINST THE PGNU, PHAEN SAID HE PERSONALLY WOULD LIKE TO SEE U.S. ASSISTANCE TO THE MEO CHanneled THROUGH AN INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATION SUCH AS THE ICRC OR UNHCR. WE AGREED WITH THIS CONCEPT AND SAID IT SHOULD BE POSSIBLE TO CHANNEL U.S. FUNDS TO ASSIST WITH RESETTLEMENT THROUGH SOME SUCH BODY. PHAEN SAID FOREIGN MINISTER CHATCHAI PLANS TO CALL ON THE ICRC WHILE IN GENEVA NEXT WEEK AND WILL EXPLORE THE POSSIBILITY OF AN ICRC ROLE IN REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT (REF B).

PHAEN AGREED WITH OUR SUGGESTION THAT UNHCR OR A JOINT ICRC/ UNHCR EFFORT MIGHT ALSO BE CONSIDERED AND AT OUR URGING SAID HE WOULD SUGGEST TO CHATCHAI THAT HE ALSO VISIT THE UNHCR IN GENEVA. (COMMENT: CHATCHAI LEFT FOR BRUSSELS ON JULY 10. FOLLOWING CONSULTATIONS WITH THE EEC HE WILL TRAVEL TO GENEVA, PROBABLY JULY 12.)

4. COMMENTING ON THE OTHER INDOCHINESE REFUGEES IN THAILAND, PHAEN SAID THE RTG WANTS ALL THE VIETNAMESE TO LEAVE THAILAND AND HOPES THE US WILL BE OF ASSISTANCE. WE TOLD HIM WE BELIEVED THE U.S. AND OTHER COUNTRIES SHOULD BE ABLE TO TAKE THE 2,000 OR SO VIETNAMESE REFUGEES REMAINING IN THAILAND. PHAEN SAID THE HIGHLY VISIBLE AND POLITICALLY EMBARRASSING KHMER AND LAO MILITARY AND GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS WOULD ALSO HAVE TO LEAVE. THE RTG IS WILLING, HOWEVER, TO PERMIT THE REMAINING CAMBODIANS AND LAO TO STAY TEMPORARILY IN THAILAND SINCE MANY OF THEM HAVE FRIENDS AND RELATIVES HERE. ACCORDING TO PHAEN, THE RTG HAS ALREADY MADE A FORMAL REQUEST TO THE UNHCR TO HELP WITH THE REGISTRATION AND CARE OF VIETNAMESE AND CAMBODIAN REFUGEES. BOTH THE ICRC AND UNHCR WILL BE SOUNDED OUT ON HOW THEY COULD BE OF ADDITIONAL ASSISTANCE IN RESETTLEMENT OF THOSE LAO AND CAMBODIANS WHO WILL REMAIN IN THAILAND.

5. COMMENT: PHAEN'S SUGGESTION, BEFORE WE RAISED THE MATTER, THAT ICRC OR UNHCR PROVIDE AN UMBRELLA FOR AID TO THE MEO REFUGEES OPENS THE DOOR TO BRINGING ONE OR BOTH OF THESE ORGANIZATIONS INTO THE PICTURE. AS THE DEPARTMENT IS AWARE, UNHCR IS A WEAK AND POORLY MANAGED ORGANIZATION IN BANGKOK. IF IT COULD BE BEEFED UP AND INJECTED WITH SOME LIFE IT COULD PROVIDE NON-POLITICAL COVER FOR THE RESETTLEMENT PROGRAM. SUGGEST WE DO WHATEVER WE CAN TO ENSURE THAT CHATCHAI SEES THE UNHCR PEOPLE IN GENEVA AND FINDS THEM RESPONSIVE.

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6. WE WOULD ALSO LIKE TO SEE UNHCR (OR ICRC IF IT WERE WILLING) PLAY AN ACTIVE ROLE IN ASSISTING LAO, CAMBODIAN AND VIETNAMESE REFUGEES IN THAILAND. CONDITIONS IN THE REFUGEE CAMPS ARE DEPLORABLE AND MANY OF THE REFUGEES ARE BECOMING DESPERATE. THIS SITUATION WILL WORSEN AS THEY USE UP THE RESOURCES THEY BROUGHT WITH THEM WHICH ARE NOW BEING USED TO BUY FOOD, MOSQUITO NETS AND PERMISSION TO LEAVE THE CAMPS TEMPORARILY. GIVEN THE UNHCR'S SHORTCOMINGS, PERHAPS IT COULD WORK THROUGH SOME OF THE VOLUNTARY AGENCIES TO ASSIST THE REFUGEES.

7. THE THAI ARE EXTREMELY RELUCTANT TO AGREE TO THE PERMANENT RESETTLEMENT IN THAILAND OF 30,000 TO 40,000 MEO REFUGEES. PHAEN'S STRESS ON THE TEMPORARY NATURE OF THIS RESETTLEMENT WILL HAVE TO BE KEPT IN MIND IN ANY NEGOTIATIONS ON ASSISTANCE TO THE RTG. WE EXPECT, HOWEVER, THAT THOSE MEO TO BE "TEMPORARILY"

RESETTLED WILL EVENTUALLY BE ALLOWED TO REMAIN PERMANENTLY IF THEY DO NOT AT SOME POINT DRIFT BACK ACROSS THE BORDER. WHILE THE RTG APPEARS TO BE LEANING TOWARDS THE ICRC AS A RESETTLEMENT AGENCY, IT WOULD BE WILLING TO CONSIDER UNHCR OR A JOINT EFFORT.

8. INVOLVING THE UNHCR AND/OR ICRC WILL HELP WITH THE MEO RESETTLEMENT AND IMPROVE CONDITIONS IN THE CAMPSHOUSING OTHER REFUGGES. WE BELIEVE IT ESSENTIAL, ASSUMING THE RTG IS WILLING TO KEEP THE MEO AND A SIGNIFICANT NUMBER OF THE LAO AND CAMBODIANS, THAT WE TAKE THE REST OUT PROMPTLY. WE THEREFORE STRONGLY URGE THAT OUR PAROLE AUTHORIZATION BE BROADENED TO PERMIT US TO TAKE THOSE CAMBODIANS, LAO AND VIETNAMESE WHO CLEARLY WILL HAVE TO LEAVE THAILAND. THIS MUST INCLUDE MILITARY PERSONNEL, GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS AND OTHER HIGH RISK INDIVIDUALS THE RTG FINDS UN-ACCEPTABLE FOR POLITICAL REASONS.
WHITEHOUSE

NOTE BY OC/T: #AS RECEIVED

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